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SUBJECT: IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: MFA UNCERTAIN OF
OUTCOME

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Russian MFA Iran desk chief Maxim Baranov, who recently returned from Tehran, told us that the Iranian political situation remained unclear, with too many potential candidates to predict the outcome of the June 12 Presidential election. Baranov thought that the large number of potential presidential candidates, which he put at 10, ensured that there would be a runoff following the initial voting. Should Ahmadinejad eventually announce his candidacy, the current President's popularity would allow him to make it to the second round, although the fate of other candidates was uncertain. Baranov argued, however, that the presence of other hard-line candidates and dissatisfaction with the country's economic situation meant that Ahmadinejad's re-election was not ensured. He thought that the "main political struggle" would come in April, after all the candidates had officially registered and Iranians, returned from spring vacations, focused more fully on the election.

¶2. (C) Baranov explained that while there were concerns that the potential candidacy of former Prime Minister Mousavi would divide the reformist camp, it also offered Iranian voters the choice of a candidate remembered for guiding the country through one of its most trying periods during the Iran-Iraq war. Mousavi was credited with successfully managing the economy under difficult fiscal constraints, which would make him an attractive choice for voters concerned with the current state of Iran's oil-dependent economy. Baranov maintained that this meant Mousavi would stand in sharp contrast to former President Khatami, who was not considered an effective manager. Should Mousavi and Khatami both run, the votes of reformist-minded Iranians could hinge upon whether their concern for Iran's economy trumped support for the country's reformist standard bearer. Baranov added that possible runs by former Tehran Mayor Karbaschi and speaker of Parliament Karroubi could only further complicate the situation for Iranian reformists.

¶3. (C) Baranov said that voter turnout would depend heavily upon the ability of the various campaigns to motivate Iranians. While in Tehran, he looked up old acquaintances who were either unsure for whom they would vote or if they would vote at all. Using typically Russian terms to describe the message and means campaigns use to appeal to voters, Baranov said that the "propaganda and political technologies" employed by the presidential campaigns will be of great importance. Television and radio are under the thumb of the Supreme Leader, but print media remains open, and the internet, while controlled to some extent by the authorities, could be employed effectively by knowledgeable campaigns. In Tehran, Baranov saw peoples' cell phones displaying the images of their favored presidential candidates and heard that campaigns would use text messaging to reach voters.

¶4. (C) Baranov believes that the youth vote remains in question, both in terms of how motivated young people will be to vote, but also how they will vote. He cautioned us not to

assume that this extremely large segment of the Iranian population was monolithic in its views, citing the presence in schools and universities of conservative student organizations, some of which fanatically maintain support for the hard-liners and ideals of the Iranian Revolution.

15. (C) Baranov posited that Iran's economy would be the primary issue in the campaign, with candidates addressing how they would handle macroeconomic policy as well as spending on education, pensions and other entitlements. The secondary issue would be relations with the U.S., with all candidates taking a hard-line with Washington. Another issue would be Iran's place in the larger Middle East - all candidates will advocate a strong Iran, although nuances in rhetoric will indicate how they intend to work with neighbors and within the international system, according to Baranov.

BEYRLE